

Please Don't Panic: Encouraging Fear-Free Language Production Among Disadvantaged Learners

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Abstract

One of the persistent problems English teachers encounter in teaching disadvantaged students from low-income backgrounds is their fear of English. The digital divide further reduces such students' exposure to English and exacerbates their fear of the language. This paper presents a set of activities that have proven to be effective in reducing the affective filter of a heterogeneous group of such learners and enabled their active engagement in spoken language production. With contextualized pedagogy as its theoretical underpinning, these interventions have also been based on the understanding of learners' interests in contemporary film/pop culture. The paper is the outcome of the experience of the researcher in different shelter homes in Kerala for the past three years.

Keywords: Disadvantaged learners, contextualized pedagogy, shelter homes, speaking skills

Introduction

English-speaking proficiency is an undeniable prerequisite for survival in today's world, as it serves as a gateway to myriad opportunities. But many skilled and creative learners from underprivileged backgrounds with limited exposure to English are fearful of the language. Therefore, following the words of Rayan (2022), it is "the need of the hour [to] empower the underprivileged with English language skills". The paper embarks on a pedagogic inquiry, aiming to understand the reasons for these learners' fear of English along with discussing effective activities

to reduce the same and to build their confidence to actively engage in spoken language production.

Defining Disadvantaged Learners and the Target Group

The paper follows the perception of Dorairaj (2012) regarding the definition of the term 'disadvantaged learner'. He posits that the term 'disadvantaged' is 'relative' since many learners face disadvantages in various ways. His definition of the term encompasses individuals facing multiple challenges as a result of disparities in access to resources. They face socio-economic, cultural, geographical, environmental and psychological backwardness compared to those from privileged backgrounds. The author carefully excludes learners facing physical, psychological and neurological disabilities from the scope of the term (2012). These learners form part of the Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) identified by the New Education Policy (Government of India, 2020).

The group of disadvantaged learners selected for the study are from shelter homes. Shelter homes can be defined as temporary homes run by government or private organisations or individuals, providing food, shelter and education for children from disadvantaged families. Studies in the field of English Language Teaching have not yet addressed the context and issues of these learners. Over the course of the last few years, the researcher has actively engaged with the group, gaining a comprehensive insight into their circumstances. It was found that the group encounters unique challenges such as leading their lives in an isolated and constrained environment with limited access to people outside these homes and absence of supportive adults in their lives; their parent(s) are either deceased, grappling with terminal illness or unable or unwilling to assume responsibility for their children.

Challenges Faced by Disadvantaged Learners in the Learning of English

Unlike privileged learners exposed to the English language through different kinds of media from a young age, most disadvantaged learners are introduced to English at school and their exposure to the language is restricted to their textbooks. Their lack of fundamentals in the English language is evident in the difficulties experienced by learners in High

School and Higher Secondary levels in using everyday English words. The situation is referred to as 'cumulative backwardness' which happens when the English language proficiency of the learner is lower than the expected level for their class (Rekha, 2007). The observed reasons for this issue include but are not limited to delayed and/or interrupted formal education, lack of proper guidance in studies and the learning gap created by Covid-19. The wider achievement gap in comparison to their peers weakens their relationship with the language and lowers their interest in the language learning process. Moreover, a lack of awareness regarding the pivotal role of the English language in accessing opportunities, coupled with a limited ambition for employment, further diminishes their motivation to acquire language proficiency. In numerous cases, the learners' L1 literacy is also poor, posing additional challenges. It must be noted that most of the issues discussed above apply to backward learners in ESL classrooms.

Theoretical Foundation

Fear of speaking English is common among learners despite years of exposure to the language. The difficulties associated with speaking a second language are further accelerated by affective variables such as anxiety and fear. Disadvantaged learners, in particular, may feel intimidated by the language. As observed by Krashen (1982), a "low anxiety situation" is required for effective language acquisition. Contextualization could prove invaluable for ensuring a comfortable and engaging language learning environment that lowers the affective filter of learners. Richards (2006) identifies contextualized pedagogy as one of the core values of Communicative Language Teaching. Fundamentally, contextualization involves placing language items into 'a meaningful and real context' instead of using them as 'isolated items' for the purpose of language learning alone (British Council, n.d.). The principle also warns us against seeing learners as 'decontextualised individuals' and points to the necessity of acknowledging the immediate and general context of the learner. It relates to the Vygotskian socio-cultural theory which emphasizes "the social and cultural dimensions of learning" (Kozulin et al., 2003).

The principle of contextualization is vital for promoting inclusion of the target group in learning activities. It must be noted that "students from marginalized backgrounds have unique experiences and their life

experiences are usually not reflected in textbooks and standardized mainstream materials for ESL education” (Sasmal & Kumar, 2021, p. 50). As Widdowson (1998, p.709) stated, “the context is not only the physical setting but the knowledge the community members share”. In the case of learners of shelter homes, practices of mainstream culture such as family trips, birthday celebrations, dining at restaurants and watching movies at the theatre are mostly unfamiliar experiences. Careful selection of topics for discussion is required because commonplace topics, such as family and relationships, could be emotionally sensitive for many of these learners. In this context, there is a need for learning materials inspired from their everyday realities. Following the insights gathered from Fred Genesee, Paulo Friere and Alex Kozulin, Arulkumar (2012, p. 140) asserts the dire need of ‘emergent tasks or activities’; the ones that are “built around the learner’s life experiences” for making “the content meaningful and easily accessible to the learner”.

Meddings and Thornbury (2011, p. 35) once said, “Think of your class as people first and as language learners second. Show interest in them and their lives. If you allow this to drive your teaching, the language they need as learners will follow”. Thus, contextualized instruction emerges as a viable strategy for acknowledging learners’ interests and individual knowledge, undoubtedly elevating student motivation and participation. Popular culture was identified as a compelling context to stimulate the target group’s interest in speaking English. Despite their limited exposure to television, the target group demonstrated keen interest in Malayalam, Tamil and Telugu films. They possess the latest information on this premise through their peers at school and movie posters.

Sample Activities

A few activities based on the aforementioned theoretical underpinnings, proven to be effective for disadvantaged learners in reducing their fear of English and motivating them to actively participate in spoken language production are discussed below. The participants of these activities comprised Upper Primary and High School level students from shelter homes and additional participants residing in the rural regions of the state interacted through a series of language camps.

Start Camera Action: The objective of this activity is to teach students vocabulary related to external body parts. However, the activity also

provides the opportunity to use simple instructions, such as: “raise your hands, point your finger, and face each other”. At first, students are divided into teams and asked to select one volunteer who stands outside when the rest of the team members and the class are shown a picture of a celebrity performing a specific action. For example, actor Vijay’s pose in the movie *Leo* where his head is lowered and hands are placed inside his pockets. The team must provide verbal instructions to the member and help him/her replicate the pose without disclosing any details of the celebrity. The team members could seek help from the teacher, if required. As soon as they finish, they have to shout “Start Camera Action”. The team that completes the task within the shortest time span wins.

Read Run Roar (RRR): The name of the activity is adapted from the title of the Telugu film *Roudram Ranam Rudhiram (RRR)*. The activity aims to lessen the embarrassment associated with using a less familiar language. Teams are given short excerpts of different movie dialogues that they must keep confidential. Selected volunteers from every team must then learn to read the dialogue independently with the help of team members. This is followed by the most exciting part of the activity, running around the room and shouting the assigned dialogue to the class without pausing in between. In this activity, the winner is determined on the basis of the vigour of the dialogue delivery; more the energy and enthusiasm, higher the chances of victory.

Saregama Squad: Using the pedagogic values of songs to motivate learners to improve their English language skills, this activity attempts to exploit the appeal of vernacular film songs among the target group. In the activity, students listen to one such song, for example, “Let me sing a Kutty story” from the movie *Master* and afterwards in teams collaborate to identify the English words from the lyrics. In the next phase, they attempt to guess the meanings of these words from contextual cues. The final phase of the activity is a spirited sing along.

The apparent lack of complexity at the surface level of the activities discussed above may make them appear trivial. However, their functional effectiveness has been proven. As the target groups’ engagement with popular culture mainly relates to movies in the South, the activities were based on this contextual framework. But while implementing the activities elsewhere, they must be tailored to align with the specific interests of the target participants.

Observations

The participants' responses to the activities were positive and their feeling of fear or embarrassment was rather low. The majority of them were not concerned about committing mistakes as they were immersed in the activities. For the activity 'Read Run Roar', short English dialogues from popular South Indian movies (e.g.: "Are you fine baby?" from *Naanum Rowdy Thaan*) were incorporated along with translated dialogues from regional movies (e.g.: "Pushpa is not a flower. He is fire!" from *Pushpa*). Students competed to participate in this activity with some taking the initiative to discover additional dialogues showcasing a reluctance for the activity to end. The mistakes in pronunciation were overlooked and the performers received constant support and encouragement from the team members, diminishing the apprehension about using English. Thus, the activity encouraged the hesitant learners to take a step closer to speaking the language.

Any reference to South Indian actors such as Allu Arjun, Prabhas, Vijay and Surya provoked a heightened response from the learners. The same could be said about the activities named after or related to popular vernacular films as they never failed to ignite the learners' excitement. After one of the activities, a learner responded, "I do not usually pay attention to English. However, here, I did because it is pretty exciting" (response translated from L1). This became possible because learners were liberated from the constraints of the structures of language and could concentrate on the messages they wished to convey. This led to meaningful interaction, a crucial aspect of language acquisition emphasised by scholars such as Krashen.

These activities also contribute to memorable learning experiences. In the pre-test, conducted before the activity 'Start Camera Action', it was found that the majority, amounting to eighty per cent, of the participants' knowledge of words related to body parts and giving instructions of body movements was limited and they were not familiar with words such as skin, finger, mouth and head. But after the activity, the performance of the students showed considerable improvement, as sixty per cent of the students were able to identify the body parts albeit with errors in spelling. They were also able to give commands such as "open (your) mouth, look (at) her, touch (your) nose, move (your) legs". The activity, 'Saregama Squad', contributes to the acknowledgement

of students' multilingual contexts and recognition of their existing knowledge of English vocabulary. In addition, it encourages them to discover bits of English from their surroundings and eventually motivates them to listen to English songs. The activity shows that vernacular film songs containing English vocabulary are an effective tool to encourage language learning from a familiar context, ensuring a seamless transition from L1 to L2.

The contextualisation of popular activities such as tongue twisters has also proven beneficial. For instance, substituting 'Billy' in 'Billy blows big blue bubbles' with the native name 'Balu' proved effective in ensuring higher learner involvement in the activity, indicating a stronger connection between learners and the second language.

Their unfamiliarity with global pop culture became evident during the activity 'Start Camera Action' when the iconic pose of Michael Jackson (crossed legs, one hand on his head and the other pointed downwards) failed to generate an emotional engagement. 'The King of Pop' was neither popular nor familiar to many of them. The dialogues from famous Hollywood characters such as Joker ("Why so serious?") had the same response when used for the activity 'RRR'. The dialogue grabbed the learners' attention only when it was accompanied by an image of the character. Their level of interest was minimal because their exposure to Hollywood films was predominantly confined to movies such as Titanic. A stark reality confronted during the interaction with the group is their unfamiliarity with iconic cultural references such as Harry Potter and Jurassic Park. In addition, current global trends, such as K-pop, have not yet permeated their awareness. Hence, it must be noted that if not carefully used, the popular culture that engages students might also alienate them.

The activities might seem in conflict with the norms of formal learning contexts, but they ensure a learning environment filled with curiosity, excitement, enthusiasm and yearning for more. Furthermore, empirical observations of interactions with the disadvantaged learners indicate that the entertainment industry serves as an effective source of motivation, facilitating language acquisition in an informal context.

Conclusion

Reducing the fear of disadvantaged learners towards the English

language and motivating them to actively engage in spoken language production may appear as an insurmountable task for instructors. This paper is an attempt to explore possible solutions in this direction. The study suggests that tailoring English language instruction to specific contextual needs of learners would enhance their language acquisition. It is time for our English language instruction to be locally defined, fostering a sense of belonging in second language classrooms. Embracing the idea of Prabhu (1987) that there is no single optimal method for all learners, the study demonstrates the potential of contextualized pedagogy in adapting language teaching methodologies to learners' unique contexts. Context sensitive models can create learner friendly classrooms and ensure better outcomes in English language learning. Furthermore, the paper posits that even modest efforts have the potential to transform the language learning experience of learners.

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